

DISASTER STRIKES IN MEXICO

In February, 65 people were killed in a tragic disaster at Grupo Mexico's Pasta de Conchos mine in Mexico. In response, the Mexican miners' union spoke out strongly against safety deficiencies at the mine, sparking a full-scale government attack on the union that continues to this day. Trade unions around the world will call for justice in Mexico on December 11.

Here Metal World reports on the events at the mine and the continuing struggle of the miners, their families and the union.

(text and photos by Kristyne Peter)

In the cool early morning hours of February 19, just after the start of the third shift at Grupo Mexico's Pasta de Conchos coal mine, a fireball exploded in the bowels of the mine triggering cave-ins all along the 2.8 km shaft and trapping 65 miners hundreds of meters below the earth.

At 6am, José Pecina's father peeked out through the window of his house and noticed the flickering lights of an ambulance up at the mine. He immediately raced down the street to his son's house. José had returned hours earlier from his afternoon shift at the mine and was resting up for a meeting at the union hall.

Hilda Muzquiz was at home that morning when she heard a radio report of an explosion at the Pasta de Conchos mine.

Praying that her husband, Ricardo Rocha, was okay, she grabbed her children and hurried to the mine.

RECOVERING THE LOST

In the days and weeks that followed, hundreds of friends and family members camped out near the mine entrance in hopes of seeing their loved ones again. As time wore on, the rescue mission turned to a recovery effort. Fearful that machinery might spark another blast, miners dug for their comrades by hand and with pickaxes. Twenty-five of the 65 workers buried below were union men from the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros, Metalúrgicos y Similares de la República Mexicana (SNTMMSRM). The recovery effort still inches along today. In almost ten months, only one body has been found.

For the 64 widows and 162 fatherless children left behind by the Pasta de Conchos disaster, the nightmare continues.

Families wait in shifts outside the mine, close to a makeshift altar of flowers, photographs and candles. These wives and siblings are the forgotten few who have left their jobs, their homes and the lives they once had, unable to move forward, unable to go back.

Claudia Escobar, a 33-year-old newly-wed and now widow, is waiting for the day her husband is returned to her. She moves her weight from hip to hip when she talks, squeezing a coloured badge with her husband's name that hangs around her neck. The entry cards are given out sparingly to the families, affording them access to the highly guarded mine entrance - the place where their husbands, brothers and sons were last seen alive.

"We have gone through a very sad period. At the beginning we could hardly eat, we couldn't sleep, waiting and waiting.

We spent every single day at the mine. Yes, it has been very sad for us. We are four women in the family, three daughters and myself. So, it has been very tough, very difficult. We look forward to the day when we shall receive what we want, my husband's corpse, so that we can give him a Christian burial," Claudia said.

A COLLECTIVE VOICE

To the surviving families, the mine is the last connection they have to their loved ones. Some family members fear that if they leave the mine property, the company will quietly shut down the recovery operations and seal it, leaving it a forgotten common grave.

Guillermo Iglesias Lopez, who lost his father in the explosion, has won the trust of the miners' families and is working with the union to ensure that search operations continue and that the surviving families receive just compensation. The 37 year-old worked in the mine as an engineer for two years and is the son of Guillermo Iglesias Ramos, a seasoned miner who spent over 20 years in the Pasta de Conchos mine.

"As a mine engineer, people search for my support and I am not going to let them down. I was assigned by the governor as head of the representative committee of the families. I don't want to let down my mother, the families, or the governor.

That is the reason for my constant struggle, so that the bodies are rescued or located. I have given up my job. They could no longer finance my leave. My wife is a teacher and she has a good salary. I maintain the struggle." Reports of company compensation for the dead vary greatly in the news and in official documentation. According to many news outlets, Grupo Mexico offered widows and their children anywhere between US\$64,000 and US\$100,000 for each fallen miner, with scholarship benefits for each of the miner's children. However, during an IMF fact-finding investigation in July, some widows reported that the company compensation packages differed from one family to another. They said some entitlements were based on age and the potential for each widow to remarry.

Recently, the local newspaper *Nueva Rosita* reported that company payments made to miners were dramatically lower than Grupo Mexico promised and do not meet the wage levels and contractual rights of the killed workers. While some family members have reportedly accepted a lump sum payment, most have refused any money from Grupo Mexico until the company recovers the bodies of the dead.

The paper quotes Guillermo as saying, "Although the most important issue is to continue to rescue the bodies and not the price of life of the loved ones...it is important to clarify doubts as far as compensation and contractual benefits to which they will be entitled, the widows and children...Above all, as relatives, we are demanding justice, so we are not going to give up." The union has been active in keeping the miners' families informed of developments between the company and the union, as well as helping provide legal assistance, groceries and financial support.

"BUT WE ARE NOT GUILTY"

Grupo Mexico's vice president for international affairs, Juan Rebolledo, has gone on the record about the Pasta de Conchos tragedy saying, "We are responsible. Of course we are responsible. But we are not guilty. It's something you cannot control. Coal mines are dangerous everywhere in the world." Families of the miners and the union disagree.

A number of surviving miners complained that they had reported the smell of gas and problems with the wiring and machinery to the company prior to the explosion. They say they were told to keep working, or leave.

In fact, the Pasta de Conchos mine, one of eight major mines in Mexico's Coahuila State, had a notorious reputation among miners for dangerous gas levels, faulty wiring, poor ventilation, and contract hires with poor training. According to many of the Pasta de Conchos workers, it was a disaster waiting to happen.

"There were always gas leaks," said José Espinosa, a 37-year-old miner and SNTMMSRM member who has worked at the Pasta de Conchos mine for the last 16 years. "Very often, some of my colleagues stopped the machines, but the engineers said that nothing would happen and ordered us to keep working. Those who refused to continue were given their card so that they left the place.

According to the union, the SNTMMSRM planned to strike after the second shift on February 19 to protest the dire conditions but the walkout was delayed in order to follow formal procedures and bring the decision to the union's Assembly. The mine exploded during the third shift.

Grupo Mexico has denied workers' claims that safety procedures were not followed and that conditions were too dangerous to work. However, backing the union's charges, recent findings by the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), a government-appointed council that investigated the accident, found gross negligence on the part of the company and the Mexican Labour Ministry.

According to the CNDH report, inspectors from the Labour Ministry found 48 health and safety infractions in July 2004, seven of which were deemed urgent. The unsafe conditions included oil and gas leaks, missing safety devices and malfunctioning lighting according to the CNDH. The council's findings stated that the Labour Ministry did not verify company compliance with safety regulations until February 7, 2006. The report stated that during the February 7 inspection, Labour Ministry officials were notified by the workers in mine number 8 (where the explosion occurred) "about improper safety conditions in which work was being performed", but nonetheless concluded that the company had addressed all previously noted safety violations.

The union has filed criminal law suits against Grupo Mexico and the authorities.

BLOOD FOR COAL

When it is asked how long a miner has worked underground, there is a common thread to the answers. Hilda Muzquiz's husband, Ricardo Rocha, worked in the Pasta de Conchos mine for one year and seven months, José Espinoza worked there 16 years and four months, José Pecina, 18 years and two months. The subtle tally of days, weeks and months punctuates a more obvious truth about mining in Mexico – it is deadly work. And the pay is little more than about US\$50 a week.

With few other jobs available, the dangers of the mine compete with the needs of the family. "Workers couldn't do anything [about the unsafe working conditions at Pasta de Conchos] out of necessity to work," said José Espinoza.

For contract workers, life in the mines is that much harder. Receiving less training, less equipment, less pay and longer hours, contract workers are usually given the most dangerous jobs and are often the first to be injured or killed.

In the case of the Pasta de Conchos explosion, 40 of the 65 dead were contract hires.

POLITICAL FALLOUT

The explosion at the Pasta de Conchos mine ignited a national firestorm throughout the government, the mining industry and the Mexican labour movement. Just days after the accident, Napoleon Gómez Urrutia, general secretary of the SNTMMSRM,

accused Grupo Mexico and the Ministry of Labour of “industrial homicide” and called for an immediate investigation.

The Labour secretary, Francisco Xavier Salazar Saenz, who has business ties with Grupo Mexico, retaliated by forcefully removing Gómez as the union’s leader and replacing him with a government appointee. The government also froze all assets of both the miners’ union and Gómez, accusing Gómez of stealing US\$55 million from union accounts, a charge he and the union sharply deny. So far, the Attorney General has not been able to find a federal judge that will issue a warrant against Gómez.

The government intervention sparked strikes at mines throughout the country, including Grupo Mexico’s large copper mines and the country’s largest steel plant, where the army opened fire on the workers, killing two. More than 250,000 steelworkers and mineworkers took to the streets to protest Napoleon’s removal and to demand safer working conditions in Mexico’s factories and mines.

To the members of SNTMMSRM, Gómez’s leadership speaks for itself. In the last four years as general secretary, he has won unheard of wage gains and improvements in benefits for his members and over 600 university scholarships have been awarded to union members and their families, the only program of its kind.

Gómez’s criticism of Grupo Mexico echoes the experience of the Pasta de Conchos miners. Thirty-six-year old José Pecina, an active member of the SNTMMSRM, has worked in the Pasta de Conchos mine since he was 18, following in the footsteps of his father who worked there for 30 years.

“Whenever someone said to the company that something was wrong, their answer was that we had to keep on and on.

If you refused, they said, ‘here is your card to go back home.’ Because we fight, the company wants to punish us. They restrain overtime, they discipline us by removing two or three days of salary. That’s the kind of company it is,” Pecina said.
